

PERSISTENCE: VIRTUE OR VICE?

I came across a factoid the other day. It simply said that the country of Iceland had no children born with Down Syndrome last year. I thought, “Wow! Have they found a cure for Down Syndrome?” Turns out that they simply perform a pre-birth test for Down Syndrome and terminate those pregnancies. Well, that’s one way. The prevalent viewpoint there is that their country would be better off without Down Syndrome people. Do you know the population of Iceland? It is 350,000 people in the whole country. The birth rate in Iceland? 4300. What portion of those children would have had Down Syndrome? One in 700. So how many Down Syndrome children are born in a typical year in Iceland? Six. So these six kids are such a threat to the purity of the genetic strand in Iceland that they have to be eliminated? Really?

Turns out Denmark has done the same thing. But Denmark is bigger. Denmark’s Population: 5.7 million. Births: 61,500 annually. Expected Down Syndrome children 85 to 90. Actual Down Syndrome children born last year: None. So that group of persons has been eliminated. Who’s next to be eliminated?

Sometimes statistics are fascinating. They can tell a story. For example: How many people are born each year all throughout the world? I had no idea. The number is 131,000,000 births each year. How many deaths each year? 55,000,000. How many abortions worldwide each year? 56,000,000. That’s right. There are more abortions each year than natural deaths each year. Does that surprise you? It surprised me. This is an annual figure not a figure collected over a number of years. 56,000,000.

What does it mean when that many people persist in terminating the lives of children that God sends? I will say this. I do not believe that God is indifferent to this fact. I do not believe that what we are doing has no effect on God. I do not believe that what we are doing does not have a major and negative impact on our emotions, our viewpoints, our attitudes, our mindsets. And those things (emotions, viewpoints, attitudes and mindsets) influence the way we are with each other, interact with each other and treat each other.

Saint Paul says in his letter to the Christians at Rome: “God delivered all to disobedience so that he might have mercy on us.” What does that mean? It means that God lets us go our own way even if it is evil and destructive, with the hope that we come to our senses in our unhappiness and turn to Him to receive his mercy. It does not mean that God simply condones evil when we do it or looks the other way. Every person begins and ends in God—for good or ill. But if I use my freedom in such a

way as to deprive another person of their freedom or even their very life, can that ever be a good thing? No matter how we try to justify it?

Go back to the first reading today from Isaiah the prophet. What does God say? “Observe what is right! Do what is Just!” And then we are to put our trust in the Lord. Nowhere does God counsel us to act in an expedient way when he sends a child to us. Never does God say in Scripture: I will send children to you but you decide who lives and who dies. Never. God could have but didn’t.

A lot is made about Jesus in the gospel today about how insensitive he is to the woman, ignoring her, then his jesting with her and the word he uses to describe her. Would it make a difference if the word weren’t Dog but Pets? “It’s not right to throw the children’s food to the pets.” Today she would probably take him to court. But He is listening. The Lord gets what is going on. Do we? He is testing her. Does she really believe in Him? The Lord knows she loves her daughter. He wants to find out if she believes in Him. He has come to invite us to faith. And it turns out she does and that is precisely what He says: Oh woman great is your faith. And her faith brings the healing to her daughter.

She persists. What is she persisting in? Her love for her child. The child that has been given to her by God and that she conceived in her womb. The child who is under assault. She wants to protect, defend and heal that child. That is her persistence. That is her faith. She is not alone Throughout the New Testament there are all kinds of instances and parables about persistence. The woman looking for the lost coin, the shepherd looking for the lost sheep, the father looking every day for his lost and prodigal son; the woman who touches Jesus’ cloak after 12 years of suffering hemorrhages; the woman who pounded on the judge’s door until she got her true verdict; the man at the pool of Bethesda who went every day for 37 years persisting in his hope of a cure. There are a lot of stories. Persistence and faithfulness.

There’s a lot of persistence in life. But not all of it is good. Some of it is vicious and truly evil but it presents itself as caring and compassion. There are two ways that are being placed before us each day in our world. Both ways claim the truth and both ways claim to be good and enlightened and necessary ways of living. They are not both true and good. God can tell the difference. And so can those who believe in the Lord Jesus. We are challenged to live in the truth, to accept what the Lord presents as true as actually true and not to substitute something that we think is better than what Our Lord desires. He desires to encounter us with his mercy but he expects us to come with a recognition of our sin and a true contrition. Otherwise the mercy will not enter and the pardon will not hold. This is important stuff.